

National Elk Refuge News – October 31, 2006

Pilot Education Program



Students share their journal entries with Outdoor Recreation Planner Lori Iverson. Iverson will spend time with the students both in the classroom and in the field throughout the course of the project.

A unique pilot project is well under way at the National Elk Refuge, forging community partnerships, grant funding and local resources to use the Refuge as a “living field lab” for a variety of elementary school art and science projects.

The National Elk Refuge has teamed up with the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival to develop an extensive interdisciplinary program centered around four expeditions onto the Refuge. Crossing seasons and disciplines, approximately 150 Teton County second graders will experience the Refuge landscape under different conditions throughout the school year. They will survey and monitor wildlife and natural features, recording their experiences through sketches, observations, notes and photo entries into field journals. Each field trip will offer unique opportunities for

discovery, focusing on a different aspect of the Refuge’s rich and complex ecosystem.

Utilizing rich community resources such as the Geologists of Jackson Hole, pARTners, the National Museum of Wildlife Art and Beringia South, the field trips will be preceded by a series of classroom visits that will give the students a framework of



Field studies will enhance classroom learning.

understanding prior to their Refuge excursions. Through the merging of scientific and artistic approaches, the students will be encouraged to develop a “relationship with place” through personal experience on the National Elk Refuge.

The pilot project began in early September with a series of presentations by pARTners, a local non-profit organization that helps educators use the arts to enhance learning and inspire creative self-expression in the schools.

Visual artist Melissa Malm set the stage by providing each student with a field journal and explaining the artistic ways they can be used for field observations and experiences. She will lead the students through creative writing and drawing lessons throughout the year, incorporating

visual and literary arts into the project. At the end of the school year, Malm will help the students create keepsake covers for their journals, which will be made into hardbound books to preserve their work.

A student proudly shows off her first journal entry, documenting her visit to the environmental study area located near the school.

Though the students were able to collect a plant sample on their visit to the school study area, they will use other methods to record their observations on the Refuge.



Above: Students learn how to operate their cameras and compose photographs.

Below: A student tries an action shot during a camera practice session on the playground.

The visual arts component was expanded through funding by the Wyoming Arts Council, allowing the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival (JHWFF) to purchase 20 digital cameras to enhance the project. Photographer Robin Elledge and JHWFF staff visited each second grade classroom in early October, teaching the children how to use the cameras. They will also accompany the students on each field trip, helping them with their photo documentation. After the sessions, the JHWFF staff will download the pictures and provide each student with a 4x6 copy of one of their photographs to include in their journal. Each classroom will also receive digital copies of all the photos taken by the class.

The second graders made their first Refuge field trip in late October. Wally Ulrich, President of the Geologists of Jackson Hole and trustee of the American Geological Institute Foundation, met the students in their classroom to first introduce the concept of how geology influences the flora and fauna of a region. Later that



*Clockwise from left:
Students enjoy the
unique experience of
hiking on Miller Butte;*

*Wally Ulrich
points out rock
characteristics;*

*John Good asks
questions of the
students before they
embark on their walk
up to the rock bands.*



same week, the students visited Miller Butte to study the rock formations. Ulrich was joined by John Good, former Chief Geologist for the National Park Service. Together, they pointed out various features to



the students, then worked with them to record their observations.

The students will next return to the Refuge in mid-winter to study the charismatic mammals of the valley. Prior to the winter Refuge visit, students will meet with Derek Craighead from Beringia South, a local non-profit organization dedicated to improving the management and preservation of the natural environment through innovative, long-term research. Craighead will help the students identify some of the area's common mammals and discuss the role of predators in the ecosystem.

The winter visit to the Refuge will include a horse-drawn sleigh ride out to the herd for close-up views of the elk, and a trip to the feed shed will

*A budding geologist
uses a hand lens to
gets up close and
personal with a rock.*



give them an “insider’s view” on the Refuge’s role in supplemental winter feeding. The students will also travel to the National Museum of Wildlife Art to view wildlife displays.



Children view elk from a horse-drawn sleigh.

Later in the spring, the studies will focus on raptors and migratory birds. A classroom visit from Petey (a peregrine falcon) and Owlle (a great horned owl) will highlight the presentation by Roger Smith, director of the Raptor Fund. The students will dissect pellets to identify the creatures being consumed by the birds and examine the construction of an abandoned nest. During the subsequent field expedition, students will identify birds at a wetlands observation site with the help of Refuge personnel.

stewardship project. The stewardship component was added to have the students consider their personal roles and responsibilities in maintaining wildlife habitat and nurture a sense of responsibility for the National Elk Refuge.

JHWFF Executive Director Lisa Samford hopes to expand the program to other grade levels and habitats within the Jackson Hole valley. Samford organized the project and wrote the grant proposals. She will continue to seek additional funding for the program’s expansion, including tapping into the National Wildlife Refuge System’s *The Nature of Learning* environmental education initiative. Like the program developed on the National Elk Refuge, *The Nature of Learning* encourages partnerships among schools, community groups and natural resource professionals and encourages an interdisciplinary approach to learning. “Our program fits beautifully with *The Nature of Learning* initiative,” explains Samford. “We look forward to the opportunity of adding it as a cooperator in this dynamic venture. “



Students will likely see newly-hatched Canada geese at the Visitor Center during their spring trip.

Photo courtesy of Sara Miller.

The final Refuge visit, slated for the end of the school year, will provide the students with an opportunity to integrate their previous Refuge trips into a self-directed group